DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 364 917 CS 508 395

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TITLE A Descriptive Analysis of Focus Group Respondents in the 1992 Presidential Debates.
PUB DATE 1 May 93
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (New Haven, CT, April 28-May 2, 1993). Document contains light type.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Debate; Higher Education; Participant Characteristics; Presidential Campaigns (United States); *Public Opinion; *Research Methodology; Sample Size; *Sampling; Statistical Surveys
IDENTIFIERS *Focus Groups Approach; New York (Syracuse)

ABSTRACT

A study assessed the selection techniques used to secure focus group respondents at one site as part of a larger study to determine what viewers learned from the 1992 Presidential Debates. A two-stage random sampling technique was developed to select focus group respondents from the 224,041 registered voters in Syracuse, New York. The random selection procedure was used to select 88.8% of the prospective participants. The remaining prospects were selected from a stratified list to compensate for under-represented members drawn from the random sample. A total of 38 respondents (6.3%) agreed to be respondents as a result of telephone calls made to prospective respondents. Last-minute declines by individuals and their replacement by participants who were conveniently available skewed the representativeness of the 29 professionals, students, self-employed people, homemakers, and retirees who actually participated in the focus groups from the demographic characteristics of the community on the variables of gender and party affiliation. When applied to the study of non-homogeneous populations, as voters are, focus group research must approximate the representativeness standards normally associated with survey methodology. While it is premature to comment on the complete content analysis of the presidential debate focus groups, a cautionary note should be sounded to refrain from over-generalizing the results. Focus group methodology, appropriately adapted, can yield both qualitative understanding of political phenomena as well as quantitative generalizability. (Six tables of data and nine footnotes are included. (Contains 12 references.) (RS)

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A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF FOCUS GROUP RESPONDENTS IN THE 1992 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

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May 1993

CS508355

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Running Head: Focus Group Respondents

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A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF FOCUS GROUP RESPONDENTS IN THE 1992 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

Presidential Debates have been a continuous fixture in American presidential elections since 1976. While some variety in format had occurred in presidential primary debates, the Presidential Debates had used a panel of journalists as questioners since their inception in 1960 (Hellwig, et al 1992; Lanoue & Schrott 1991). The 1992 Presidential Debates introduced two features which had not previously been used. The first feature was the use of multiple formats to conduct the debates. The second feature was the commissioning of focus groups by the Commission for Presidential Debates to evaluate how voters used the debates to inform their decisions. The combination of these two features created an opportunity to assess the effect of the several formats on voters.

We have limited our analysis in this paper to an assessment of the selection techniques used to secure focus group respondents. The transcription of focus group tapes is underway and should be completed this summer. Only preliminary results drawn from the focus group facilitators are available at this time. In order to locate the relevance of this analysis to the larger project, we will briefly describe the purpose and procedures employed in the study. We will then describe the selection techniques used at one site and how (in)adequately it represented the larger community from which it's sample was drawn. Finally, we will report the selection technique used at the several other sites and evaluate the limitations of non-representative sam-

pling. Implications for the generalizability of focus group research in political campaigns will conclude our discussion.

Presidential Debate Focus Group Study

The larger research project was funded through a grant from the Commission for Presidential Debates. Prof. Diana Carlin, University of Kansas, was the grant recipient and principal researcher. The purpose of the research was "to determine what viewers learn from debates and what reactions participants had to the formats used in the debates." (Carlin 11/2/92)

Fifteen sites were initially selected to conduct focus groups on the debates.[1] A total of 497 respondents participated in forty-eight focus groups. Most of the sites conducted three focus groups drawn from the following five targets: The debate about the debates (late September);[2] 1st Presidential Debate (Oct. 11); Vice-Presidential Debate (Oct. 13); 2nd Presidential Debate (Oct. 15); and the 3rd Presidential Debate (Oct. 19). Three formats for focus groups were used with at least five sites assigned to use each format: Format #1 used the same group members for all three debates (Panel Format);[3] Format #2 used different individuals in each session; and Format #3 ran two focus groups simultaneously segregated by gender.

Instructions provided to Focus Group Facilitators included directions for recruitment of participants. Facilitators were provided with a standardized script and requested to select individuals who represent a cross-section of the community. It was recommended that facilitators select individuals from voter

registration lists, if available, or through the use of randomly generated phone numbers from the exchanges used in the community. Facilitators were also asked to balance the number of men and women participating in the focus groups as well as represent the party affiliation of local demographics.

Individuals who participated in the focus groups reported to a designated location to watch the debate together.[4] Where possible, facilitators selected C-SPAN as the preferred channel for viewing the debate to minimize the influence of commentary. In any event, the volume was not turned on until the beginning of the debate and was turned off at the conclusion of the debate. At the conclusion of the ninety-minute debate, participants were given a short break and light refreshments before convening the focus group.

When participants first arrived at the site, they were asked to read and sign a consent statement. Participants also completed a questionnaire in several stages. The first stage was completed before the debate and consisted of several demographic items, their perceived level of exposure to campaign coverage during the past 6-8 months, and the top three sources of campaign information. Participants were asked whether they had a candidate preference (but not who it was). The second stage occurred immediately following the conclusion of the debate. Here participants were asked whether their candidate preference had changed as a result of watching the debate. The third stage was conducted after the conclusion of the focus group discussion.

Participants were asked whether their candidate preference had been altered as a result of the focus group discussion.

The focus group discussions were (audio) tape-recorded. A standardized schedule of questions was provided to each facilitator to direct the discussion. Topics for discussion included questions about other sources of information participants used to gain knowledge of the candidates and issues, the influence of press coverage, their assessment of the debate formats, and recommendations for future presidential debates.

At the conclusion of the focus group discussion and completion of the questionnaire, participants were thanked and dismissed. Each participant received a nominal honorarium as a token of thanks and to help defray any costs involved with their participation. Summaries of the discussion and questionnaires as well as the audio-tapes were sent to the principal investigator.

Selection Procedure and Results from Syracuse

The authors were recruited by the principal investigator to serve as facilitators for the study in late August. The city of Syracuse is located in Onondaga county in central New York. Onondaga county has a population of approximately 460,000 residents and is the largest county in a three-county SMSA. It was decided that registered voters in Onondaga county would constitute the sampling frame from which focus group participants would be selected. The Onondaga County Election Board (OCEB) made voter registration lists available for use in the study.

The voter registration lists had recently been updated in

anticipation of the November election.[5] While voter registration continued during the selection of participants, the registration lists were not revised until after the election. Consequently, the sampling frame remained constant during the course of the selection process. The voter registration lists were printed on 4,228 pages with 53 names per page enrolling 224,041 voters. A two-stage random sampling technique was developed in which first a page number (1-4228) and then a page location number (1-53) was selected. Krueger (1988) recommends the use of random or systematic sampling procedure for the selection of respondents.

Among other information, the registration lists included a voter's name, gender, party affiliation, address, and phone number. As prospective participants were drawn from the registration lists, a record was made of the above information. Over six hundred prospective participants were eventually selected using this procedure.[6]

As the principal researcher had instructed facilitators to represent a cross-section of the community, we relied upon the random selection procedure to select almost ninety percent (88.8%) of our prospective participants. The remaining prospects were selected from a stratified list to compensate for under-represented members drawn from the random sample.[7]

The demographic characteristics of the sampling frame on the variables of gender and party affiliation are compared with the demographics of the prospective participants in Tables 1 and 2.

The sample characteristics roughly approximated the sampling frame from which they were drawn.

Table 1
DEMOGRAPHICS BY GENDER

	Male	Female	Total
Sampling Frame	45.6% (99,931)	54.4% (119,059)	100% (218,990)
Sample	42.3% (256)	57.7% (349)	100% (605)

Note$_1$: There were 5,101 voters not identified by gender.

Table 2
DEMOGRAPHICS BY PARTY AFFILIATION

	Dem	Rep	NE	Con	Lib	RTL	Oth	Total
Sampling Frame	30.2% 67,658	42.4% 94,991	24.2% 54,172	1.4% 3,196	0.8% 1700	0.4% 922	0.6% 1402	100% 224,041
Sample	30.4% (184)	40.2% (243)	26.8% (162)	1.5% (9)	0.5% (3)	0.5 (3)	0.2% (1)	100% (605)

Note$_1$: Percentage for Sample exceeds 100% due to rounding.

Note$_2$: Dem = Democrat; Rep = Republican; NE = No Entry (Indep.) Con = Conservative; Lib = Liberal; RTL = Right to Life; and Oth = Other

Actual participants were recruited from the sample in the order they were selected using a script provided by the principal researcher. We made no attempt to contact individuals who had no listed phone number.[8] Other individuals were not contacted when their selection would have over-represented their gender or party affiliation.

As prospects were called, a record was kept to note the outcome of the phone call. The record included notation of whether contact with the target was achieved. In instances where no contact was made, notation included whether there was no answer, a busy signal, an answering machine, etc.

When we were successful in contacting a person other than the designated target, we attempted to establish an alternate time to call back. In those instances where a third party reported the target would not (or could not) participate in the focus group, we recorded the reason offered.

When contact was made with the target prospect, we recorded whether the person was willing to participate. If the target declined to participate and offered a reason, we recorded the reason. We did not ask for a reason unless the target volunteered one.

Prospects who agreed to participate in the focus group were asked to confirm a mailing address so that additional information could be sent. A follow-up phone call within a day of the scheduled focus group was made as a reminder of the time and location. Table 3 reports the breakdown of attempted contact by category.

Table 3
CONTACT ATTEMPTS BY CATEGORY

	No Attempt	Unsuccessful	Decline	Accept
Subjects	16.7% (101)	36.2% (219)	40.8% (247)	6.3% (38)

We were interested in the reasons individuals declined to participate. As our notations recorded these reasons, we used a content analysis scheme to code the reasons offered. A coding sheet was developed to represent the reasons individuals offered. The coding scheme allowed both reasons offered by a third party as well as by the target. Three coders, not affiliated with the project were trained to analyze the record sheets. An acceptable inter-coder reliability was obtained using Scott's pi (81.5%).

About one-third (35.1%) of the 247 targets who were successfully contacted and declined to participate offered a reason. Table 4 reports the reasons of targets who declined to participate.

Table 4
SUBJECTS WHO DECLINED AND OFFERED A REASON

	Pol	Age	Trans	Sched	Time	Fear	Other	Total
Reason	2.3% (2)	7.0% (6)	3.5% (3)	44.2% (38)	7.0% (6)	2.3% (2)	33.7% (29)	100% (86)

Note: Pol = Political; Trans = Transportation; Sched = Schedule

While 38 individuals initially decided to participate in the study, only 29 (76.3%) actually materialized for the focus group.

In most instances we were unable to determine why individuals backed out of the focus group. Of those who backed out for which a reason could be determined, one backed out because of a sick parent. The spouse of another subject who backed out explained that his wife changed her mind at the last minute because "it really doesn't matter." Finally, a third individual backed out because, as a federal employee, his supervisor advised him that his participation could be in violation of the Hatch Act.

Last minute declines by individuals and their replacement by participants who were conveniently available skewed the representativeness of the focus group participants from the demographic characteristics of the community on the variables of gender and party affiliation. Tables 5 and 6 report the breakdown by gender and party affiliation of the actual focus group participants.

Table 5
GENDER OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

	Male	Female	Total
Sampling Frame	45.6% (99,931)	54.4% (119,059)	100% (218,990)
Sample	42.3% (256)	57.7% (349)	100% (605)
Participants	55.2% (16)	44.8% (13)	100% (29)

Table 6
PARTY AFFILIATION OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

	Dem	Rep	NE	All Other	Total
Sampling Frame	30.2% (67,658)	42.4% (94,991)	24.2% (54,172)	3.2% (7,220)	100% (224,041)
Sample	30.4% (184)	40.2% (243)	26.8% (162)	2.6% (16)	100% (605)
Participants	37.9% (11)	34.5% (10)	24.1% (7)	3.4% (1)	100% (29)

Note: All other equals the combination of Conservative, Right to Life, Liberal, and Other from Table 2.

While the gender and party affiliation skews may seem nominal in the aggregate of the three focus groups conducted at this site, the composition of the individual focus groups are more distorted. Of course, the two known variables can be compared against a population norm. Other characteristics, for which population norms are less well established within the sampling frame, are also likely to be skewed. For instance, the occupations reported by the twenty-nine participants in the focus groups are broken down into the following categories: Professional (14), Self-employed (3), Homemaker (3), Retired (3), Student (2), Service (2), and one each Blue Collar and Unemployed.

In the final section of this paper we evaluate the generalizability of focus group results. The selection methods for obtaining respondents influence the ability to generalize the presidential debate focus groups to the general population.

Limitations to Representativeness and Generalizability

We have described in some detail the methods used for the selection of focus group members at one site for the recent presidential debates. Reports from other facilitators participating in the project indicate that random selection methods were not used uniformly. Some sites used random digit dialing to obtain the bulk of their participants while others relied on voter registration lists. Others abandoned random selection methods when preliminary yields were disappointing.[9]

One question which needs to be addressed centers on whether the mix of selection methods will ultimately yield results from which valid and reliable generalizations about the presidential debates can be obtained. Another issue focuses upon whether the assumptions upon which focus group methodology is based need to be reconsidered when applied to the study of non-homogeneous targets. We will address each of these in turn.

The question of generalizability depends upon two assumptions. First, the sample must be adequately large in order to control for statistical artifacts. Second, the sample must be representative of the target population so that the normal distribution of elements will be observed. (Kish 1965) Our concern here is with the second assumption. As McClosky (1967) notes: "In general a sample must more perfectly reflect the characteristics of the universe being studied if the investigator wishes to describe that universe than if his main concern is to discover or test relationships among variables." (68)

Selection techniques which do not ensure the representation of the population in their sampling limit the generalizability of the study. Random selection techniques are not the only method for securing representativeness. However, when the phenomena being studied are the undifferentiated impressions formed by voters, it behooves the researcher to reflect the universe to which the impressions will be generalized.

The question of generalizability becomes a central concern when the assumptions of focus group research are evaluated. Focus group research originated in market research in which specific market segments were the target of investigation. Consideration of sample size (Libresco 1983) and representativeness (Merton et al 1990) are less valued than homogeneity and availability (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990). Rosenstein (1976) noted the methodological weakness of focus groups is in the subjectivity employed in conducting the group as well as their lack of replicability.

When applied to the study of non-homogeneous populations, as we contend voters are, focus group research must approximate the representativeness standards normally associated with survey methodology. While it is premature to comment about the yet to be completed content analysis of the presidential focus groups, we believe a cautionary note should be sounded to refrain from over-generalizing the results.

Focus groups may hold promise for the analysis of political debates. Focus group methodology, appropriately adapted, can

yield both qualitative understanding of political phenomena as well as quantitative generalizability. However, to accomplish this, procedures suitable to survey research must be employed.

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Endnotes

1. The initial fifteen sites were subsequently expanded to seventeen locations to include the debates sites. The sites were: Sacramento, CA; Boston, MA; Atlanta, GA; Sioux Falls, SD; Spokane/Cheney, WA; Tempe, AZ; Durham, NH; Lawrence, KS; Hattiesburg, MS; Detroit, MI; Stephenville, TX; Cincinnati, OH; Kansas City, MO; Richmond, VA; Tampa, FL; St. Louis, MO; and Syracuse, NY.

2. The original schedule of debates proposed by the Commission for Presidential Debates were for presidential debates on September 22, October 4, and October 15 with a vice-presidential debate on September 29. When the candidates could not agree on dates and formats, the principal researcher scheduled focus groups to record the public's perception of the debate about the debates. Shortly after these focus groups were scheduled, the candidates finally agreed on dates and formats for the debates.

3. The term "panel" is used as a standard designation for the repeated use of the same subjects. (Babbie 1992)

4. For the "Debate on the debates" focus groups, participants did not have anything to watch on television prior to the focus group.

5. The registration lists were current through September 22, 1992.

6. There were four participants who were selected by non-random techniques to substitute for participants who withdrew at short notice.

7. The first 536 names were drawn from the random selection procedure. The remaining names (69) were selected from a random selection, but only from among women who were registered as Democrats, Liberals, and No Entry (Independents).

8. The sample included individuals who had no phone number recorded on the voter registration list. We attempted to secure a phone number from the directory. In most cases we were unsuccessful.

9. A request for information from facilitators on how they selected participants yielded responses from 8 (of 17) sites. Of those responding, only four used random selection methods as the primary means of securing participants. Other methods included "convenience" sampling and door-to-door solicitation.